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An historical jewel in the Bitterroot

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MEDIA RELEASE

AN HISTORICAL JEWEL IN THE BITTERROOT

By Leslie Vining
Office of University Relations
University of Montana

vining/rv
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dailies
w/pic

MISSOULA--

One June 2, 1857, Major John Owen "commenced laying up the foundation" of a trading post one mile north of what today is Stevensville.

Nearly 125 years later, six University of Montana students have excavated the last segment of Fort Owen's foundation under the direction of Carling I. Malouf, professor of anthropology, and H. Duane Hampton, professor of history.

Malouf began excavations at the fort in 1957. He said in documents that his work "unquestionably was key to the eventual establishment of this site as a Montana State Monument."

In late August, at the conclusion of a state-funded project, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks plans to hold a ceremony for the public at the fort.

The excavations revealed the fort's dimension, the location of rooms, a well, outhouse, two bastions, a grist mill and a water flume located near the fort. More than 1,200 artifacts have been recovered from the site.

In the search for more artifacts, the UM students shoveled about three inches of dirt from an area north of the only remaining wall of the original fort. They carefully lifted the dirt from the lower ground level and found pieces of glass, nails and some unidentifiable objects.

Beneath the warm sunshine the students joked about the dust and bugs, while pondering the history behind their finds. One student remarked at the discovery of some thick, frost glass, "Hmm, early Egyptian."

(over)

Fort Owen--add one

In addition to the extensive work done by Malouf and UM students at the site, the Stevensville Historical Society has donated the profits from a recently published book and volunteer labor to the project. The society received a grant from the 1981 Montana Legislature and assistance from the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to continue the work.

Claire Rhein, the society president's wife, said Owen came in 1849 with a regiment of mounted riflemen specifically to establish a post on the Oregon Trail. The fort was used for fur trappers and trading and was never military.

"A unique thing about John Owen and this place was that he came to settle. He started to farm and even brought apple trees in on mules."

According to a chronology compiled by Malouf and the late K. Ross Toole, UM history professor, Fort Owen had its beginning in 1850 when the Jesuits at St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley abandoned their project and sold the mission property to Owen for \$250. Owen began making adobe blocks for the fort in 1852. A sawmill was built to cut timber for the roof and later a grist mill was constructed.

The rapid deterioration of the fort has been attributed by state officials to the poor mixture used in Owen's construction of the adobe blocks.

Owen completed the fort in the mid 1860s. Unusual to the site was the construction of an ice house with a capacity of 1,600 cubic feet. The exact location of the ice house is unknown, but it was built to provide ice for Owen's "drinks"--he was an alcoholic.

In 1877 Owen suffered a mental breakdown and was taken to a Helena hospital. He was "shipped" back to Pennsylvania, where he died in 1889. The fort reverted to W.J. McCormick, the property owner, to whom Owen was in debt.

McCormick was killed when he was blown off the roof of the west barracks and crushed by falling timbers during a violent windstorm in 1889.

(more)

Fort Owen--add two

After his death the fort was occupied by various inhabitants--by farmers and ranchers, hiding from warring Nez Perce Indians, by employees, and later by cattle and pigs.

In 1937 one acre of property on which Fort Owen is located was purchased by Paul C. Phillips and Charlie Buck, two citizens who hoped to preserve the fort as a historical site. They later donated the land to the state. In 1971 the fort was placed on the list of national historical sites.

The state grant appropriated \$20,000 to the Stevensville Historical Society and \$10,000 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for renovation at the fort. According to Tom Greenwood, the region 2 park manager, restoration of the east barracks has been completed and panels telling the history of the fort will be displayed inside. The state plans to hold a ceremony at the fort in late August after the project is completed.

Rhein called the recent project "a rather remarkable cooperative effort between the state and a private organization." She said the society has provided most of the labor and materials used in the project.

Greenwood said the next step, if state funding is granted, will be to add a water system for public use and fire protection at the fort. He estimated the cost of the system at \$10,000.

"Nobody could do at one time all the things that we want to do to the fort," Greenwood said. "It is, nevertheless, a good project no matter how long it takes. It is a state jewel for historical preservation."

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